



A Lover's Complaint

From off a hill whose concave womb re-worded° *hollow side echoed*
A plaintful story from a sist'ring° vale, *nearby*
My spirits t'attend° this double voice accorded°, *hear / agreed*
And down I laid to list° the sad-tuned tale; *listen to*
5 Ere long espied a fickle° maid full pale, *a disturbed*
Tearing of papers, breaking rings a-twain°, *in two*
Storming her world with sorrow's wind and rain.

Upon her head a plaited hive° of straw *hat*
Which fortified° her visage from the sun, *protected*
10 Whereon the thought° might think sometime it saw *imagination*
The carcass of a beauty spent and done.
Time had not scythèd all that youth begun,
Nor youth all quit; but spite° of heaven's fell° rage, *in spite / fierce*
Some beauty peeped through lattice of seared° age. *withered*

15 Oft did she heave her napkin to her eyne,¹
Which on it had conceited characters°, *imaginative designs*
Laund'ring the silken figures in the brine
That seasoned° woe had pelleted in tears, *experienced; salted*
And often reading what contents it bears;
20 As often shrieking undistinguished° woe *inarticulate*
In clamours of all size, both high and low.

Sometimes her levelled eyes their carriage ride²
As° they did batt'ry to the spheres° intend; *As if / planets*
Sometime diverted their poor balls° are tied *eyeballs; cannonballs*
25 To th'orbèd° earth; sometimes they do extend *spherical*
Their view right on;° anon their gazes lend *straight*
To every place at once, and nowhere fixed,
The mind and sight distractedly commixed°. *confused*

Her hair, nor° loose nor tied in formal plait, *neither*
30 Proclaimed in her a careless hand of pride;³
For some, untucked, descended her sheaved° hat, *fell from her straw*
Hanging her pale and pinèd cheek beside.
Some in her threaden fillet° still did bide, *headband*
And, true to bondage, would not break from thence,
35 Though slackly braided in loose negligence.

A thousand favours° from a maund° she drew *love tokens / basket*
Of amber, crystal, and of beaded jet°, *beads of black stone*
Which one by one she in a river threw
Upon whose weeping margin she was set;° *seated*
40 Like usury applying wet to wet,⁴

1. Often did she raise her handkerchief to her eyes.

2. Sometimes her eyes, aimed (like a cannon), glare (are mounted on a swivel).

3. A hand careless of pride; a hand proud in its care-

lessness (knowing that she could attract with no effort).

4. Like usury making wealth wealthier (by adding tears to the stream).

Or monarch's hands that lets not bounty fall
Where want cries some, but where excess begs all.⁵

Of folded schedules° had she many a one
Which she perused, sighed, tore, and gave the flood;

45 Cracked many a ring of posied gold and bone,⁶

Bidding them find their sepulchres in mud;

Found yet more letters sadly penned in blood,

With sleided silk feat and affectedly

Enswathed⁷ and sealed to curious° secrecy.

50 These often bathed she in her fluxive° eyes,

And often kissed, and often 'gan to tear;

Cried 'O false blood, thou register° of lies,

What unapproved° witness dost thou bear!

Ink would have seemed more black and damnèd here!

55 This said, in top of rage the lines she rents,

Big° discontent so breaking their contents.

letters

careful

flowing

record

unreliable

rips

Powerful

A reverend man that grazed his cattle nigh

Sometime a blusterer that the ruffle knew⁸

Of court, of city, and had let go by

60 The swiftest hours observèd as they flew,⁹

Towards this afflicted fancy fastly¹ drew,

And, privileged by age, desires to know

In brief the grounds and motives of her woe.

So slides he down upon his grainèd bat,²

65 And comely° distant sits he by her side,

When he again desires her, being sat,

Her grievance with his hearing to divide.°

If that from him there may be aught applied

Which may her suffering ecstasy° assuage,

70 'Tis promised in the charity of age.

'Father,' she says, 'though in me you behold

The injury of many a blasting° hour,

Let it not tell your judgement I am old;

Not age, but sorrow over me hath power.

75 I might as yet have been a spreading° flower,

Fresh to myself, if I had self-applied

Love to myself, and to no love beside.

'But, woe is me, too early I attended

A youthful suit—it was° to gain my grace°—

80 O, one by nature's outwards° so commended

That maidens' eyes stuck over all° his face.

Love lacked a dwelling and made him her place,

politely

share

grief

disfiguring

blooming

was designed / favor

external appearance

were glued to

5. Or . . . all: Or like the monarch who, rather than give a little to the truly needy, gives a great deal to those who already have plenty.

6. A ring of gold and ivory inscribed with messages (of love).

7. With . . . / Enswathed: Delicately and affectionately wrapped in strands of separated ("sleided") silk.

8. Once a man of the world who was accustomed to the busier life.

9. had . . . flew: was past the prime of life, but had learned from experience.

1. Toward this person afflicted by love rapidly (close by).

2. So he comes down the bank with the help of his forked herdsman's staff.

And when in his fair parts she did abide
She was new-lodged and newly deified.

85 'His browny locks did hang in crookèd curls,
And every light occasion° of the wind *chance stirring*
Upon his lips their silken parcels° hurls. *(of hair)*
What's sweet to do, to do will aptly find.³
Each eye that saw him did enchant the mind,
90 For on his visage was in little° drawn *miniature*
What largeness thinks in paradise was sawn.⁴
'Small show of man was yet upon his chin;
His phoenix° down began but to appear, *singularly lovely*
Like unshorn velvet, on that termless skin⁵
95 Whose bare outbragged the web⁶ it seemed to wear;
Yet showed his visage by that cost more dear,⁷
And nice affections° wavering stood in doubt *discriminating tastes*
If best were as it was, or best without.⁸ *(shaven)*

'His qualities were beauteous as his form,
100 For maiden-tongued° he was, and thereof free.⁹ *modest / well-spoken*
Yet if men moved° him, was he such a storm *angered*
As oft twixt May and April is to see
When winds breathe sweet, unruly though they be.
His rudeness so with his authorized youth
105 Did livery falseness in a pride of truth.⁸

'Well could he ride, and often men would say
'That horse his mettle from his rider takes;
Proud of subjection, noble by the sway,⁹ *control*
What rounds, what bounds, what course,° what stop he makes!" *gallop*
110 And controversy hence a question takes,
Whether the horse by him became his deed,
Or he his manège by th' well-doing steed.⁹

'But quickly on this side the verdict went:
His real habitude° gave life and grace *disposition*
115 To appertainings° and to ornament, *external attributes*
Accomplished in himself, not in his case.⁹ *mere appearance*
All aids, themselves made fairer by their place,
Came for additions;¹ yet their purposed trim
Pieced not² his grace, but were all graced by him.

120 'So on the tip of his subduing tongue
All kind of arguments and question deep,
All replication prompt,° and reason strong, *quick reply*

3. Ways are easily found to do pleasant things (look, love).
4. What one would imagine seeing on a larger scale in paradise.
5. Like velvet with its nap unclipped, on that indescribable (invulnerable to time) skin.
6. Whose naked surface showed more beautiful than the down covering.
7. Yet his face looked more precious (attractive) because of its rich clothing.
8. His . . . truth: His roughness, sanctioned by his "youth," employed falseness in truth's uniform.
9. Whether . . . steed: Whether he performed so well because of his horsemanship or because his grace in horsemanship (French: *manège*) was a result of the horse's skill.
1. Attempted to increase his worth.
2. their . . . not: their anticipated decorative effect did not increase.

- For his advantage still did wake and sleep.³
 To make the weeper laugh, the laughter weep,
 125 He had the dialect and different skill,⁴
 Catching all passions in his craft of will,⁵
- “That^o he did in the general bosom reign *So that*
 Of young, of old, and sexes both enchanted,
 To dwell with him in thoughts, or to remain
 130 In personal duty, following where he haunted.^o *often went*
 Consents⁶ bewitched, ere he desire,^o have granted, *before he asks*
 And dialogued for him what he would say,
 Asked their own wills, and made their wills obey.
- “Many there were that did his picture get
 135 To serve their eyes, and in it put their mind,
 Like fools that in th’imagination set
 The goodly objects^o which abroad^o they find *sights / traveling*
 Of lands and mansions, theirs in thought assigned,
 And labour in more pleasures to bestow them⁷
 140 Than the true gouty landlord which doth owe^o them. *own*
- “So many have, that never touched his hand,
 Sweetly supposed them mistress of his heart.
 My woeful self, that did in freedom stand,
 And was my own fee-simple,⁸ not in part,
 145 What with his art in youth, and youth in art,
 Threw my affections in his charmèd^o power, *magical*
 Reserved the stalk and gave him all my flower.
- “Yet did I not, as some my equals^o did, *young girls of my rank*
 Demand of him, nor being desired yielded.^o *yielded sexual favors*
 150 Finding myself in honour so forbid,
 With safest distance I mine honour^o shielded. *chastity*
 Experience^o for me many bulwarks builded *(of “my equals”)*
 Of proofs new bleeding, which remained the foil⁹
 Of this false jewel and his amorous spoil.
- “But ah, who ever shunned by precedent
 155 The destined ill she must herself assay,^o *try out*
 Or forced examples ’gainst her own content
 To put the by-past perils in her way?¹
 Counsel may stop a while what will not stay,^o *stop for good*
 160 For when we rage,^o advice is often seen, *(with lust)*
 By blunting^o us, to make our wills more keen. *repressing*

3. For . . . sleep: (Like servants) adjusted their waking and sleeping hours for the benefit of their master.

4. The manner of speech and versatile skill.

5. His faculty of persuasion. Here and in the next stanza, there are suggestions of other senses of “will.” See sonnets 135–36.

6. Powers of (sexual) consent; consenting people.

7. theirs . . . them: imagining the “lands and mansions” their own, they try harder to use them pleasurably.

8. And had absolute control of myself (as of land in freehold).

9. Of . . . foil: Fresh examples of seduction, which remained the defense (or sword—picking up the military, specifically fencing, imagery of “distance,” “shielded,” “bulwarks,” “bleeding,” lines 151–53). But “foil” as the dark material in which gems are set to make them look more brilliant also works with “false jewel” in the following line, to suggest that the young man’s sexual escapades made him more attractive.

1. Or . . . way: Or reminded herself, to counter her present inclinations, of bygone dangers. forced: urged.

‘Nor gives it satisfaction to our blood°
That we must curb it upon others’ proof,°
To be forbod° the sweets that seems so good
165 For fear of harms that preach in our behoof.°
O appetite, from judgement stand aloof!
The one a palate hath that needs will taste,
Though reason weep, and cry it is thy last.

‘For further I could say this man’s untrue,²
170 And knew the patterns° of his foul beguiling;
Heard where his plants in others’ orchards° grew,
Saw how deceits were gilded in his smiling,
Knew vows were ever brokers° to defiling,
Thought characters and words merely but art,³
175 And bastards of his foul adulterate heart.

‘And long upon these terms I held my city°
Till thus he gan° besiege me: “Gentle maid,
Have of my suffering youth some feeling pity,
And be not of my holy vows afraid.
180 That’s° to ye sworn to none was ever said;
For feasts of love I have been called unto,
Till now did ne’er invite nor never woo.

“All my offences that abroad° you see°
Are errors of the blood,° none of the mind.
185 Love made them not; with acture they may be,⁴
Where neither party is nor true nor kind.°
They sought their shame that so their shame did find,
And so much less of shame in me remains
By how much of me their reproach contains.⁵

“Among the many that mine eyes have seen,
190 Not° one whose flame my heart so much as warmèd
Or my affection put to th’ smallest teen,°
Or any of my leasures° ever charmèd.
Harm have I done to them, but ne’er was harmèd;
195 Kept hearts in liveries,° but mine own was free,
And reigned commanding in his monarchy.

“Look here what tributes wounded fancies° sent me
Of pallid pearls and rubies red as blood,
Figuring° that they their passions likewise lent me
200 Of grief and blushes, aptly understood
In bloodless white and the encrimsoned mood°—
Effects of terror and dear modesty;
Encamped in hearts, but fighting outwardly.⁶

sexuality
experience
forbidden
for our benefit

instances
(wombs)
go-betweens

chastity
began to
What is

in the world / learn of
sexual passion
faithful or loving

There is not
pain
hours of leisure
in uniform (service)

lovers
Showing
form (of rubies)

2. I am able to say more about this man's perfidy.
3. Written and spoken words were merely instruments of skill (in seduction).
4. with . . . be: by a mere physical act they may be performed.
5. By . . . contains: The more they name me in their reproaches (thus revealing that they are unchaste and hence, by this logic, to blame).
6. Effects . . . outwardly: White ("terror") and red (blushing "modesty") fighting on their faces.

205 "And lo, behold, these talents° of their hair,
 With twisted mettle amorously impleached,⁷
 I have received from many a several fair,⁸
 Their kind acceptance weepingly beseeched,
 With th'annexations° of fair gems enriched,
 And deep-brained sonnets that did amplify°
 210 Each stone's dear nature, worth, and quality.

"The diamond?—why, 'twas beautiful and hard,
 Whereto his invised° properties did tend;
 The deep-green em'rald, in whose fresh regard
 Weak sights their sickly radiance do amend;⁹
 215 The heaven-hued sapphire and the opal blend¹
 With objects manifold; each several° stone,
 With wit well blazoned,° smiled or made some moan.

"Lo, all these trophies of affections° hot,
 Of pensived° and subdued desires the tender,°
 220 Nature hath charged me that I hoard them not,
 But yield them up where I myself must render—
 That is to you, my origin and ender;°
 For these of force must your oblations² be,
 Since I their altar, you enpatron me.³

225 "O then advance of yours that phraseless° hand
 Whose white weighs down the airy scale of praise,⁴
 Take all these similes⁵ to your own command,
 Hallowed with sighs that burning° lungs did raise.
 What me, your minister for you, obeys,
 230 Works under you,⁶ and to your audit° comes
 Their distract parcels° in combinèd sums.

"Lo, this device was sent me from a nun,
 A sister sanctified of holiest note,°
 Which late her noble suit° in court did shun,
 235 Whose rarest havings° made the blossoms° dote;
 For she was sought by spirits of richest coat,°
 But kept cold distance, and did thence remove
 To spend her living° in eternal love.°

"But O, my sweet, what labour is't to leave
 240 The thing we have not, mast'ring what not strives,°
 Planing° the place which did no form⁷ receive,
 Playing patient sports in unconstrained gyves!⁸
 She that her fame so to herself contrives⁹

7. With misdirected courage (confused spirit?) lovingly intertwined. Many editors emend "mettle" to "metal."

8. Its unseen—referring to the diamond but also, perhaps, to the equally "beautiful and hard" young man.

9. in . . . amend: which, when looked at, can heal weak vision.

1. Blended: many-colored; accompanying other "objects" (line 216).

2. For these necessarily must be offerings at your altar.

3. Since I am the altar (on which they were offered), you must necessarily be the patron saint of the altar (me).

4. Whose white exceeds any measure of praise.

5. These emblematic gifts and the sonnets that explain them.

6. What . . . under you: Whatever pays homage to me, your agent, serves you.

7. No impression (of love, on the heart).

8. Patiently enduring shackles ("gyves") that have not been forced upon one and that can be removed (or that do not constrain). (The entire sentence is ironic.)

9. She who thus contrives for herself the reputation of disinterest in love.

245 The scars of battle scapeth by the flight;
And makes her absence valiant, not her might.¹

“O, pardon me, in that my boast is true!
The accident which brought me to her eye
Upon the moment° did her force° subdue, *Immediately / resolve*
And now she would the caged cloister fly.
250 Religious° love put out religion’s eye. *Devoted (sexual)*
Not to be tempted would she be immured,° *walled up*
And now, to tempt, all liberty procured.

“How mighty then you are, O hear me tell!
The broken bosoms° that to me belong *hearts*
255 Have emptied all their fountains in my well,
And mine I pour° your ocean all among. *pour into*
I strong o’er them, and you o’er me being strong,
Must for your victory us all congeat,° *gather*
As compound° love to physic° your cold breast. *medicinal / treat*

260 “My parts° had power to charm a sacred nun, *attributes*
Who disciplined, ay dieted in° grace, *sustained by*
Believed her eyes when they t’ assail begun,²
All vows and consecrations giving place.³ *yielding*
O most potential love: vow, bond, nor space
265 In thee hath neither sting, knot, nor confine,³
For thou art all, and all things else are thine.

“When thou impresses,° ⁴ what are precepts worth
Of stale example? When thou wilt inflame,
How coldly those impediments stand forth
270 Of wealth, of filial fear, law, kindred, fame.
Love’s arms are° peace, ’gainst rule, ’gainst sense, ’gainst shame; *Love’s power compels*
And° sweetens in the suff’ring pangs it bears *And love*
The aloes° of all forces, shocks, and fears. *bitterness*

“Now all these hearts that do on mine depend,
275 Feeling it break, with bleeding groans they pine,⁵
And suppliant° their sighs to you extend *as supplicants*
To leave° the batt’ry that you make ’gainst mine, *cease*
Lending soft audience to my sweet design,⁶
And credent° soul to that strong-bonded oath *trustful*
280 That shall prefer and undertake° my troth.” *advance and guarantee*

“This said, his wat’ry eyes he did dismount,° *lower (military)*
Whose sights till then were levelled° on my face. *aimed*
Each cheek a river running from a fount
With brinish current downward flowed apace.
285 O, how the channel° to the stream° gave grace, *cheeks / tears*

1. And achieves a reputation for valor by avoiding the temptation of love, not by strongly resisting it.
2. When my attributes (“parts”) began to assail her heart.
3. *potential* . . . *confine*: powerful love: a “vow” has no force (“sting”), a “bond” does not tie (“knot”), and “space” does not restrain (“confine”).
4. When you draft someone into your (military) service; make an impression on the heart.
5. Because each sigh supposedly robbed the heart of a drop of blood.
6. Looking favorably on my intentions.

Who glazed with crystal gate the glowing roses
That flame through water which their hue encloses.⁷

'O father, what a hell of witchcraft lies
In the small orb of one particular° tear! *single*
290 But with the inundation of the eyes
What rocky heart to water will not wear?° *wear away*
What breast so cold that is not warmed here?
O cleft° effect! Cold modesty, hot wrath,° *divided / passion*
Both fire from hence and chill extincture hath.⁸

295 'For lo, his passion,° but an art of craft, *passionate speech*
Even there resolved° my reason into tears. *dissolved*
There my white stole of chastity I daffed,° *took off*
Shook off my sober guards and civil° fears; *seemly*
Appear to him as he to me appears,
300 All melting, though our drops this diff'rence bore:
His poisoned me, and mine did him restore.

'In him a plenitude of subtle matter,° *raw material; cunning*
Applied to cautels,° all strange forms receives,⁹ *tricky devices*
Of burning blushes or of weeping water,
305 Or swooning paleness; and he takes and leaves,° *uses this and shuns that*
In either's aptness,° as it best deceives, *As each is appropriate*
To blush at speeches rank,° to weep at woes, *offensive*
Or to turn white and swoon at tragic shows,

'That not a heart which in his level° came *range (of fire)*
310 Could scape the hail of his all-hurting aim,
Showing fair nature is¹ both kind and tame,
And, veiled in them,° did win whom he would maim. *(kindness and tameness)*
Against the thing he sought he would exclaim;
When he most burned in heart-wished luxury,° *lust*
315 He preached pure maid° and praised cold chastity. *virginal purity*

'Thus merely with the garment of a grace° *with external appeal*
The naked and concealèd fiend he covered,
That th'unexperient° gave the tempter place,° *inexperienced / entry*
Which like a cherubin above them hovered.° *(as if protectively)*
320 Who, young and simple, would not be so loved?²
Ay me, I fell, and yet do question make° *wonder*
What I should do again for such a sake.° *person; pleasure*

'O that infected° moisture of his eye, *tainted*
O that false fire which in his cheek so glowed,
325 O that forced thunder from° his heart did fly, *that from*
O that sad breath his spongy lungs bestowed,° *emitted*
O all that borrowed motion seeming owed³
Would yet again betray the fore-betrayed,
And new pervert a reconcilèd° maid.' *penitent*

7. Who . . . encloses: the river is seen as a kind of glass covering ("crystal gate") over the cheeks ("roses"), whose color shines through the "water," like a jewel enclosed in glass. Who: (the stream).

8. Both . . . hath: Tears heat up cold modesty and extin-

guish hot passion (as the following stanza elaborates).

9. all . . . receives: is shaped into novel forms.

1. Pretending his nature is.

2. Would not desire such a lover.

3. That emotion apparently his own.